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Bulgaria

Bulgaria occupies a small piece of the Balkan Peninsula sharing common borders with Romania (north), Serbia (west), the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (southwest), Greece (south) and Turkey (southeast), and direct sea links with Russia, Ukraine and Georgia through the Black Sea. As a former socialist country, Bulgaria was a popular destination mainly for the former Eastern Bloc countries before 1989, attracting leisure and recreational visitors. Since the democratic changes in the early 1990s, the country is a well-known mass tourism destination with a particular focus on summer holidays, ski tourism and low-cost trips. Increasingly, some alternative forms of tourism have been developed such as spa tourism, rural tourism and wine tourism.

Overview of tourism policies and development

Tourism in Bulgaria first appeared at the end of the 19th century with the establishment of the Bulgarian Hiker's Society in 1895 when the first mountain lodges were built. In the early years of the 20th century, basic recreational facilities and sanatoria were established to provide balneo and spa procedures for middle class workers. This trend continued even after 1944 when socialism was adopted as a main political ideology. Adopting the Soviet model, tourism was managed and developed by "Balkantourist", the state tourist organization and the main provider of subsidized holidays founded in 1948.

The first planning and development of mass tourist facilities, however, started in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The governmental strategy relied on tourism as the main source of foreign exchange. In this regard, the first large resorts were constructed – "Golden Sands", "Druzhba" (renamed later to "St. Constantine and Helena"), "Albena", "Sunny Beach", and "Chaika" (renamed to "Sunny Day") on the Black Sea coast and "Pamporovo" and "Borovets" in the mountain areas. The newly created recreational villages were primarily designed to cater for domestic visitors, but later on, they also served as low-cost destinations for Western Europeans and tourists from other Eastern Bloc countries, fulfilling the need of a hard currency.

The tourism sector changed dramatically after the fall of communism in 1989. The transition from state economy to market economy resulted in a number of economic issues and financial constraints, which led to a massive decline in state funded holidays. Likewise, the number of tourists from the former Soviet Bloc was seriously reduced largely as a result of the political changes. Bulgaria started to attract Western tourists but the level of infrastructure was insufficient to compete with already established European resorts. The privatization of state owned properties (1997-2002) involving massive sales of accommodation and entertainment enterprises, was about to address this weakness. The Bulgarian Black Sea coast was modernized very rapidly, sometimes in cooperation with foreign travel operators, mainly British and German.

In modern days, Bulgaria's tourism industry is a growing sector within the national economy with a stable growth during the last few years. In terms of governance, tourism is managed by the Ministry of Energy and Economy, which surpassed the former State Agency of Tourism. Summer recreational holidays are the main tourism product and the largest inbound markets

are European Union countries (e.g. Germany, United Kingdom, Poland, Romania), Russia, Ukraine and Israel.

Trends

The main trends in the Bulgarian tourism industry are the emergence of alternative tourism types and the promotion of the country to new tourism markets.

Alternative tourism has emerged as a new trend during the last few years largely as a result to demonstrate the diversity of tourism resources. Good weather conditions, low-cost travel and close proximity to Western Europe are the main reasons for developing many new forms of special interest tourism.

Spa tourism has been re-developed, replacing the old sanatoria with new luxury hotels. The towns of Hisarya, Sandanski, Pomorie and Velingrad are popular destinations for both domestic and international tourists offering various procedures and therapies.

Rural tourism is another developing sector, combining the history and traditions of Bulgarian folklore and cuisine. Tourists are accommodated in houses built in the 19th century and they have the opportunity to spend time with their host helping with some typical household duties (e.g. pick herbs and berries, milk a cow, prepare yoghurt, make pottery). Rural tourism is increasingly popular in the Rhodopes area and is often combined with visits to wine cellars. Increasingly popular is communist heritage tourism, which includes visits to socialist monuments, houses of former communist leaders and the newly opened Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia.

Another important trend is the continuous promotion of Bulgaria as an all year round destination. New marketing strategies have emerged during the last few years, which try to emphasize the diversity of tourism products. Bulgaria has appeared in a number of travel exhibitions and shows promoting its cultural sites, architectural and religious heritage, wines and spa facilities. However, despite these efforts, Bulgaria is still a favourite spot for young travelers, mainly looking for inexpensive accommodation or cheap all-inclusive packages.

Top destinations to visit

Popular destinations are the capital city of Sofia, summer resorts on the Black Sea coast or winter resorts in the mountain areas of Rila, Pirin and the Rhodopes. The capital city of Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna and Burgas offers numerous heritage attractions, shopping areas and cultural events. Bansko, Pamporovo and Borovets are relatively cheap but well-developed ski centres, while Sunny Beach, Golden Sands, Pomorie and Albena are summer recreational destinations. The old capitals of Pliska, Preslav and Veliko Tarnovo represent the history of ancient and medieval Bulgarian kingdoms with well-preserved churches, fortresses and palaces. However, in terms of cultural sites, the World Heritage Sites are arguably the most visited destinations.

World Heritage Sites

Bulgaria has nine World Heritage Sites, all of them inscribed from 1979 to 1985. Seven of them are cultural sites and two are natural.

Cultural

- Ancient City of Nessebar (1983)
- Boyana Church (1979)
- Madara Rider (1979)
- Rila Monastery (1983)
- Rock-Hewn Churches of Ivanovo (1979)
- Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak (1979)
- Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari (1985)

Natural

- Pirin National Park (1983)
- Srebarna Nature Reserve (1983)

Among them, the most popular ones are the Ancient City of Nessebar, a well-preserved architectural reserve famous for its churches, and Rila Monastery, one of the symbols of the country dedicated to St. Ivan of Rila, the first Bulgarian hermit.

Despite its growing importance, however, tourism in Bulgaria suffers from a wide range of economic and political issues. A lack of tourist infrastructure, seasonality of tourism services and controversial marketing and administration policies have been regarded as the main challenges for the post-socialist tourism development. However, the diversity of tourism products, good weather conditions and accessible transport links are prerequisites for further tourism expansion.

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See Also: Burgas, Bulgaria; Sofia, Bulgaria

Further Readings

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